

Swagger Was the Key to Life

A memoir by John Connally of Texas, who looked and acted the part he never got.

IN HISTORY'S SHADOW

An American Odyssey.
By John Connally with Mickey Herskowitz.
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By Nicholas Lemann

NOTHING John B. Connally ever did was as disarming as the way he behaved when he went bankrupt in the Texas real-estate bust of the late 1980's. It was a maximally humiliating situation: the confidant to Presidents and billionaires, 70 years old and still imperious, Connally had managed to fall into a financial ruin so complete that he had to sell off the furniture on his ranch. But he and his wife, Nellie, went so far as to serve as hosts at the auction of all their property. They never displayed bitterness or meanness; Connally even appeared in good-humored advertisements as a kind of living reminder that there is life and even a measure of dignity after bankruptcy.

"In History's Shadow: An American Odyssey" is a little like the auction. Connally's sense of his own stature was such that if he'd had his druthers, he might have produced a deadly serious memoir aimed at enhancing his historical reputation, like the books of Richard M. Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson or Henry A. Kissinger — or no memoir at all, just noble silence. Instead, before his death in June, he submitted with good cheer to the publishing routine that, for a famous person, pays best: the breezy as-told-to book laced with juicy tidbits. (The "to whom," in this case, is Mickey Herskowitz, who has previously written books with Bette Davis, Dan Rather and Howard Cosell.) There is far more material in these pages on what happened when Connally was wounded at John F. Kennedy's side in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963 — a subject that Connally was proud of never having discussed publicly — than on what he did in his three terms as Governor of Texas. Somehow, though, he emerges pretty gracefully from an exercise that could have embarrassed and diminished him. He gives up the goods — including an account of the teen-age suicide of his firstborn child — without ever seeming cheap, petty or bathetic.

Though he was raised in rural poverty, Connally spent his entire adult life as a Texas Übermensch. He was elected president of the University of Texas Student Assembly on the same day in 1938 that Nellie was elected Sweetheart of the university; and a year later, at the age of 22, he was the chief aide to Texas's brightest young politician, Congressman Lyndon Johnson, and so was right in the middle of everything that important Texans were doing. Connally was so spectacularly handsome and commanding that he was being talked about as a prospective governor or even President not long before he was out of his 20's. He personified the great Texas progressions of his lifetime, from poor to rich, country to city, small-time to worldly.

Therefore the most interesting question about Connally is why he never got the part he looked and acted. It is a question that obviously occurred to Connally himself a time or two, and he answers it in his book in two ways, one direct and the other almost unconscious.

In Connally's mind, his Presidential prospects were a secondary casualty of Lee Harvey Oswald. (As assassination buffs know, Connally did not believe in the Warren Commission's "single bullet theory," but he says here that he did believe Oswald, acting alone, was the assassin. Oswald, he thinks, fired three shots, hitting Kennedy twice and himself once.) Had Kennedy been re-elected in 1964, the nation in 1968 could easily have turned to the popular Democratic Governor of Texas as a replacement. But Lyndon Johnson's Presi-

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From left, John Connally, Lady Bird Johnson and Lyndon B. Johnson praying at breakfast with John F. Kennedy the day of the assassination.

dency left people in no mood to consider another Texan for the top job in the 1960's.

Connally's next big chance seemed to be 1976, at what would have been the end of Richard Nixon's second term; Mr. Nixon, he says, had made Gerald R. Ford Vice President on the understanding that Connally, who had become a Republican in 1973, would be the anointed successor. Watergate spoiled that plan. In 1980, the year Connally actually ran for the Republican nomination, he could not beat Ronald Reagan, partly because as a party switcher he was regarded with suspicion by Republicans and partly because he had been tried, though acquitted, on bribery charges. That was the end of the story, though he does offer as a parting shot the observation that Mr. Reagan was not "as good a president as I would have been."

The real problem, though, may have been the profound ambivalence about politics that is a running motif of "In History's Shadow." The Presidents Connally knew best — John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon — were, for better or worse, completely dedicated to the profession of politics. But Connally was never willing to descend fully to the perilous depths of total commitment. He took nine years out of his rising period during the 1950's to work for Sid Richardson, the Texas wildcatter who founded what is now the Bass brothers fortune, because he feared "the desperation that comes with being a man of modest means in politics." He found it distasteful to go to football games with Johnson because all Johnson wanted to do there was talk politics. He urged Kennedy not to ride in the motorcade in Dallas because it would be "exhausting ... a powerful psychic drain," and instead to save his energies for meeting with businessmen. He decided to leave the governorship because "whatever I was able to accomplish in solving the problems of the state, there

would always be new problems" — a thought it is impossible to imagine Lyndon Johnson having.

Connally metes out praise by way of variations on adjectives like firm, elegant, disciplined, sophisticated, ruthless, distant and, above all, tough — proconsular words. He found something weak and petty about the basic practice of politics; he absorbed almost unthinkingly (because it fit his nature so perfectly) the main idea of the Texas Democratic Party in its all-powerful heyday in the post-World War II years, which was that the purpose of government is to help business. Connally's most lasting achievement is having helped to build the University of Texas into a national institution during his governorship, but he did this, he explains, only because "industry follows brainpower." His "message" in the 1980 campaign was, to Clinton-era sensibilities, shockingly narrow-gauged: "If you're not willing to get into the political arena and defend your business, to defend your interests, to defend this economic system, then you're not worthy to head any corporation in America, in my judgment."

When Connally erred, which was pretty often, it was in the direction of acting excessively decisive and tycoonlike. He advised Johnson to threaten to drop nuclear weapons on Hanoi, and Mr. Nixon to burn the Watergate tapes. In December 1990 he and a Texas oilman friend, on a private mission to free the Middle East hostages, called on Saddam Hussein in Baghdad ("He was calm, deliberate, restrained, and gave the impression of being totally in command of himself") and told him that "the average person in the United States or elsewhere knows little of your disagreement with the Kuwaitis" — this as his country was gearing up for war over just that issue.

It is sometimes amazing how little he knew about life outside the Texas-Washington-corporate nexus; while describing his work wheeling Government jobs for constituents when he was an aide to Johnson, he tosses off as an aside that "those were the days before Civil Service" — which actually was founded in 1883. No doubt Connally's piling up of \$300 million in debt in the early 1980's was another example of his tendency to view swagger as the one key to life.

Once in 1973 Mr. Nixon invited Connally, who was practicing law in Texas at the time, after having served as Mr. Nixon's Secretary of the Treasury, to join him and Leonid Brezhnev on a cross-country flight on Air Force One, so that the Soviet leader could meet the man he probably would be dealing with in the late 1970's. "As we flew over the Grand Canyon, the three of us talked about matters relating to the rearrangement of the universe," Connally reports, the tone indicating that this was the milieu for which he was best suited. But the truth is that for most of his life Connally wound up playing, against type, the second lead to men you'd think he would have outshined: Lyndon Johnson, Sid Richardson, Richard Nixon; even in his final, real-estate phase, his protégé, Ben Barnes, was the managing partner of the business. In the last pages of this book, Connally tosses bouquets to President Clinton, Ross Perot and Ann Richards, the Governor of Texas, perhaps to indicate his willingness to play consiliere. How could these people have been John Connally's bosses, instead of his being theirs? Because they were willing to put ambition ahead of dignity, and he wasn't. □